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Summary: Sam and John have made their decisions and gone their separate ways. It's Dean who still has choices left to make.

(Pre-series. AU-ish. Canon-compliant but not written with canon compliance in mind.)

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Dean knew his little brother had been holding something in for a few weeks. The way the kid shuffled around with his shoulders a little hunched proved that. Sam's secrets seemed to have a physical weight that bent his shoulders whenever he kept them. Dean had tried to ask if everything was all right once or twice, but Sam had either clamed up or given a laugh, smiling and saying \_of course not, I'm fine.\_

So now Dean was being patient.

Ok so he wasn't really all that patient, but he was trying. He hadn't asked Sam what was wrong or studied him silently in almost an hour. That had to be some kind of record.

Sam was an eighteen-year-old rebel, as far as Winchester life was concerned. He wanted to go to college, do something other than hunting with his life. Dean didn't really get the concept. Hunting was just what Winchesters \_did\_, no bones about it. He'd never questioned it. Sam had the annoying compulsion to question everything, which had been getting he and his father into arguments since the kid was ten.

Though, as much as Dean didn't understand Sam's desire to go to college and be something other than a badass, he knew it was Sam's dream. Sam wanted it and had been going after it since he was able to. He wanted something other and hunting, and considering how dangerous their job was, Dean kinda found himself half supporting the

idea. If it wasn't for the fact that supernatural things could try to eat Sam wherever he went, Dean would drive him to college himself.

All this considered, Dean was pretty sure that Sam's current secret had something to do with college. He'd graduated from high school a couple months ago, and that's when the " well it wasn't brooding but something like it " had begun in earnest. Dean was proud to say that he'd gone to Sam's graduation, cheered like a maniac when the kid got his diploma. He'd seen Sam blush a bit and duck his head when he'd heard his big brother. Mission accomplished.

Dad hadn't been there. Another promise broken. For some reason, Sam had tried to pretend it didn't hurt him, but Dean could tell it had. He was kinda mad at his dad for that. As much as Dean knew the school wasn't important to hunting, it was important to Sam, which made it important. To Dean anyway. Their Dad couldn't seem to do the math. There were only so many 'he wishes he could be here's and 'he tried Sam's Dean could give out before Sam stopped believing him. Dean was pretty sure he'd reached that number a long, long time ago.

After graduation, Sam began to brood, and it was only building. Something weighed on Sam, and the longer he held it, the heavier it got, the larger it grew, and the more it sucked out of him. A secret parasite Sam fed with himself.

Dean knew Sam's secret had to do with his dream, Sam never hid anything else from Dean. So Dean was bracing himself for when it came out. When it did, he didn't expect it, and hadn't prepared for it.

He was sitting in the living room of their current run down house, cleaning some of his guns. Dad was sitting at the table, putting notes from their latest hunt into his journal. The creaky board in the hall to the room Sam and Dean shared alerted the older Winchesters to the presence of the youngest.

Sam stood in the entrance to the hall, looking at his feet as he shifted his weight back and forth, and there was an envelope held in his hands. It looked old, and crinkled, like it had been shoved into the bottom of a duffle bag for a while.

"You got something you want to say Sam?" \_Well that's a great way to start this conversation\_. Dean thought, casting his father a glance, before focusing back on Sam. The kid looked terrified, more scared evidently of this conversation than he was of clowns. Sam was brave though, and he looked up, trying to meet his father's eyes.

He looked over at Dean for a split second, and what Dean saw there scared him. Sam was asking, silently, for backup. He'd never, \_never\_ done that before. Not once in all the arguments that he'd had with their father had he ever \_tried\_ to drag Dean in to it. Not before it even began. Dean got a sick feeling in his gut that Sam knew how this conversation was going to go, and he was asking Dean not to hate him.

Dean did the only thing he could do, what he'd always done. He gave Sam what he asked for, and nodded his little brother on.

Sam took a deep breath and looked back to his father, then held his envelope out, letting it speak for him. Dad reached out and took it quickly, fishing the letter inside out without even looking at the envelope it was in.

He looked at it for a moment before his face turned dark, his jaw hard and eyes cold.

"What is this." It wasn't a question. It was an accusation.

"It's an acceptance letter." Sam said, his voice small, but somehow confident. Dean could hear the shake in it though. Sam was bracing himself, and with those four words, Dean knew exactly what he was bracing for. "From Stanford."

\_Stanford? \_Dean knew his brother was smart, but \_Stanford\_. That was damn impressive. Even Dean knew that. If Sam was telling him this without their Dad in the room, Dean would be congratulating him. The only sticky part was that they all knew that Sam didn't just want to be accepted to college, he wanted to actually go.

"There are lots of breaks, and I'd have the whole summer off to come back a-

"You're not going." Dad said firmly, cutting off Sam's negotiation, and any attempts to reason. Dean's gaze snapped to his father for a moment. That was about the worst thing their father could say. No \_we can't pay\_ or \_we can't spare you\_ or anything. No sympathy, no understanding. Just a solid order of the same type Sam had been bucking against his whole life.

Sam's jaw snapped shut with a click, and Dean saw that his brother was trying not to cry. Dad wouldn't even \_look at him\_.

"Dad-

"You are not going and that is final."

"Yes \_I AM!\_" Sam shouted back, eyes blazing, and Dean saw as grief was overridden and hidden by anger. "I am going." He said, quieter now, but with just as much conviction.

"No, you're not." Dad said, and Sam's eyes blazed more. It was a battle of wills now, and Dean already knew the end. He saw it coming and screamed at himself to say something, try to stop it, but he was frozen, his body wouldn't move. "You're a hunter Sam, not some academic."

"I'm not a hunter! I never was!" Sam yelled back.

"You're a Winchester." Dad replied, now finally looking at Sam. "That makes you a hunter."

"Maybe to you." Sam replied. "Not to me."

\_What did that even mean?\_ Dean wondered, because he was with his dad on this one, Sam was a Winchester, and Winchesters were hunters. Plain and simple.

"So long as you are a part of this family, you will do what this

family does."

"I can hunt with you during the breaks and in the summer." Sam replied, trying once more to bargain with his father.

"No."

"I'm going Dad." Sam said, his voice rock hard again. "And you can't stop me." Sam turned on his heel, vanishing out of the room. Dean stared at his father, expecting the man to do something other than sit there. This wasn't Sam throwing a hissy fit and going to mope in his room. Sam was serious. He was going.

"Dad--"

"Don't you start too." Dean jerked back as if struck. He'd had his father's ire turned on him before, but there was something so threatening about it, something different in the tone, a dare to go on, see what'll happen. With a shock, Dean realized it was the tone their dad used with Sam, but had never been turned at him. A tone for the defiant son.

"Dad he's gonna go." Dean said quietly.

"No he isn't." John said confidently, tossing Sam's letter away like it was nothing. "He's a lot of talk, but he won't leave."

Dean didn't, couldn't, believe his father. Was he really that blind to Sam?

Sam came out from their room a moment later, his eyes red (tear-irritated) but determined, his duffle bag slung over his shoulder.

"What do you think you're doing?" Their father snapped, and Sam stopped short. Dad still didn't get up, but he was staring right at Sam now.

"Going." Sam replied.

"The hell you are." John replied. "You're still part of this family, and you will do as I say."

"I'm eighteen. I don't have to." Sam replied, his voice a broken growl. Dean sat in frozen horror as he watched his family rip apart. "I'll come back for summer, but I'm going Dad. I'm going to college."

"You can't have both worlds Sam. One foot in and one foot out, it doesn't work. You pick one. Us, or your precious college." John said.

Sam froze, his grip turning his knuckles white on his duffle bag's straps. His whole body rigid, but Dean could see his eyes. They were staring at his father, begging, begging him, not to do this.

"That's not how I see it." Sam replied.

"Then you better wake up, boy!" John snapped, and Sam jerked back,

and Dean realized Sam was afraid, of his own father. "You can't be a hunter and go to college."

"I don't want to be a hunter!" Sam screamed, his voice breaking as all his grief and rage spilled out. "I never did! You wanted it and you shoved it on me and on Dean! You never asked us!"

"You don't have a choice!"

"And that's where you're wrong." Sam said. "I do have a choice and I'm not going to be a hunter. I'm not."

"If you don't want to be a hunter, you don't want to be part of this family." Dad shot back, and Sam flinched like he'd been burned, his eyes broken for a second before he shuddered them closed. He put his head down and Dean watched in horror as his brother strode to the door to their house. As his hand reached the handle, their father spoke again.

"You walk out that door, don't you ever come back."

Sam paused, and turned to look at Dean, and for the barest moment Dean let himself believe that Sam would stop and submit, walk back to his room and Dean would be able to

But Sam grabbed the doorknob, turned it, and walked out the door.

Dean wasn't watching his father. He was staring at the door that separated him from the single most important thing in his life.

Sam had just walked out that door. He'd left his family behind. His precious college more important than his family. He'd made his choice, them or college-

\_Maybe to you. Not to me.\_

\_That's not how I see it.\_

Wait. \_Wait.\_

Something, something he wasn't quite sure he understood but maybe, maybe he did, clicked into place for Dean.

Sam hated hunting. He loathed it. He didn't want to be a hunter. He'd said that blatantly enough, enough times. But what neither Dean nor his father had stopped to try and understand was that Sam didn't hate them, just their job. Sam had expressed, twice, a willingness to come back to a world he hated. Why? So that his dad would let him go. Sam was obviously set on going, but instead of just slipping off in the middle of the night, he'd tried to get his father's consent. Even if he knew it wasn't going to work. He'd tried, however futilely, to stay with his family, stay connected somehow.

And Dad hadn't even tried to listen. He'd just said no.

Sam wasn't leaving Dean. Dean recognized now what he'd seen in Sam's eyes that last second before he left the house.

\_I'm sorry. I don't want to do this.\_

Sam had just been presented a choice, an impossible one, and walked out the door. Now Dean was presented with a choice all his own. Support his father, or stand with his brother.

In a moment of sheer brilliance and stupidity, he made his choice, and ran after his brother.

Dean leapt up off his bed and ran out the door, slamming it behind him and running into the street, looking for his brother. He caught a glimpse of a slim figure walking down the road, a long way off. He started after him running down the asphalt.

"Sam! SAM! Sammy!" He yelled, and his brother stopped, turning towards Dean's voice. Dean wasn't really sure what the next step in his plan was, so he ended up just running into Sam, wrapping his too thin little brother up in his arms. Sam was stock still for a moment, seeming shocked and scared at Dean's arms wrapped around him, then tentatively, he brought his arms up on Dean's shoulders.

Dean just tightened his grip, nearly crushing his brother.

And Sam's grip turned fierce, clutching back just as hard. Dean could feel the wetness of tears on his shoulder, and just stood there, holding his little brother, never wanting to let him go.

And at the very same time, doing just that.

"I'm sorry Deanâ€¦" Sam whispered, his weak voice a far cry from the strong one he'd leveled at their father. And much more honest. "I can't go back."

"I know." Dean said quietly. "I'm not asking you to." Sam shuddered in his arms, burrowing deeper into Dean's arms, and Dean just let him. "I've got your back, little brother. I've got you." He ran a hand up and down Sam's back, trying to calm him down. Sam finally gathered himself, and Dean let him go to stand on his own again, but still held onto his shoulders lightly.

"I have to go." Sam said quietly.

"I get that." Dean said, and Sam looked at him skeptically. "Wellâ€¦maybe I don't, but I'm working on it ok? Justâ€¦gimme some time, Sammy." Sam nodded carefully, looking away. "You're not going to walk all the way to California, are you?" Dean asked, and Sam shook his head, Dean's joke falling a little flat.

"I was gonna take the bus." He said quietly. Dean frowned, rubbing the back of his neck, knowing what he wanted to say, but unsure if the offer would be accepted.

"Can I take you?" He asked, keeping his eyes down. This was the test, the check to see if Sam really did want nothing more to do with his family.

"To the bus?" Sam asked, confused.

"To Stanford." Dean replied, and watched as Sam's eyes grew comically huge. "I mean, I can drive you to the bus station if you want."

"You'd do that?" Sam asked, voice very small now. "Drive me to Stanford?"

"Wellâ€¦yeahâ€¦if you want." Dean said, and Sam just gaped at him, shocked.

"Wha-what about dad?"

"What about him?"

"What did he say, about, you knowâ€¦"

"I didn't ask him. He gave the Impala to me anyway, we could just take it." Dean said, trying to act nonchalant about the whole thing, but heart soaring with the idea that Sam would be willing to let Dean drive him to Stanford.

"Deanâ€¦I don't want you to get in trouble." Sam said carefully.

"Hey, it's nothing, ok? I'll get you down there, help you set up and everything, make sure there aren't any fuglies in the area, then drive back here."

"Umâ€¦dad didn't seem too keen on the idea of me going to college." Sam said. "I don't think he'll like you helping me with it. I don't think I'm-

"Dad can take his 'Winchester equals hunter' stuff and shove it. You're my little brother, nothing in this world is ever going to change that." Dean fired back, cutting Sam off. Sam blinked at him, eyes owlshly wide. "Just, wait here. I'll go grab the car and pick you up, ok?"

"Yeah, ok." Sam replied, still seeming bewildered by what was happening. Dean let go of his brother, making a few wild gestures, telling Sam to stay, as he tried to understand himself exactly what was going on and what he was doing, then he turned and ran back to their house.

He didn't bother going back into the house, or even looking at it, he just fished the Impala's keys out of his pocket, slid into the driver's seat and cranked the engine, pulling the car out into the street. He found Sam in the exact spot he'd left him, and hopped out. Sam seemed to be running on autopilot, letting Dean guide him to the trunk where his older brother took his duffle bag, then he wandered to the passenger door. Dean slid in beside him, and pulled the Impala back in to drive and tried not to look in the mirror as their father got farther and farther away.

Sam seemed to both relax and grow more confused the farther they went, and his bafflement reached a peak when Dean passed the turn off for the bus station, and the next time Dean looked over at Sam, he was crying.

"Sam? What's wrong?" It was a stupid question, Dean knew. There were a thousand things wrong right now, Sam just had to pick one out of the hat. But Sam didn't pick one, he smiled, rubbing his eyes as if he just noticed he was crying.

"Nothing's wrong." \_I just can't believe this is happening.\_ Dean heard the unspoken words clearly, and shook his head. "I don't want to go." Sam said suddenly after a long pause in silence, and if it wasn't so quiet, Dean would have missed it.

"What?" He asked, confused. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't want to \_leave\_." Sam said, choosing his words more carefully this time. He turned to Dean, eyes wide and pleading. "Please, Dean, you have to know that I-I don't want to leave but-I don't have a choice."

\_Sure you do\_. Dean wanted to reply, but he didn't, he just tightened his jaw, but Sam still got the message, sagging in his seat.

"I'm sorry. I don't want it to be like thisâ€|"

"Then why are you making it like this?" Dean said, unable to stop the words before they left his mouth. Sam looked away, but he didn't clam up.

"I need to leave." He said quietly. "If Dad and me stay around each other, we're only gonna keep fighting until one of us is too tired andâ€|and I'm afraid it's gonna be me."

"What?" Dean's vocabulary was shrinking rapidly, and it was scaring him a little.

"I'm afraid that if I stay with you guysâ€|the next time I try to get out it's gonna be a lot more permanent." Sam said quietly.

It took Dean a moment to process Sam's words, and once he did he tried to deny them a moment more but the meaning there was clear.

"Sam." Dean said, his voice quiet, low and trying not to shake.

"Yeah?"

"I'mâ€|" \_ Sorry? Appalled? Scared? \_"I'm not leaving you." Sam stared at Dean, and Dean found himself wondering if he'd said the right thing. What exactly was one supposed to say when their little brother said he was scared ofâ€|of \_killing himself\_ if he didn't leave. Dean certainly didn't know.

"I know." Sam said quietly. "I'm not leaving either. At least, I don't want to."

"Dad'll come around."

"Does he ever?" Sam asked, and for the first time in a long time, Sam's voice wasn't bitter, it was pleading. Begging \_big brother please make it ok. Tell me it's ok.\_

"He'll come around."

"Will you?" Sam's question hit Dean in the gut. He was driving Sam to college, wasn't that enough? Wasn't that proof?



Proof of what? Dean wasn't ok with this. He was mad. He was hurt. He was trying not to be but he was. Sure he wasn't leaving Sam but it was taking everything in Dean's power not to drive his little brother to wanting nothing to do with him. So he could sit in the right and say that Sam left when in reality, it would be his fault.

It struck Dean then that it was that very thing, driving Sam away so hard until he had no other choice because he just didn't, was what their father had done. Had been doing for a while.

Dad was, whether he saw or not, crushing Sam in his crusade onwards, and Dean had followed him. Neither man ever tried to look through Sam's eyes, understand what he saw. Sam had never known normal life, Dean had known four years of it and their father had a lifetime of it. Sam hadn't. Maybe he needed that. And for Sam, the normal world and normal life wasn't so much a loss as a total deprivation. He wanted it, wanted to know it.

Grass is always greener on the other side. Except in this case, the phrase held some water. Normal life was sure a lot better.

"Sam."

"Yeah?"

"I never asked, reallyâ€|why do you want to go to college?" Dean asked, and Sam frowned, looking down. "You just want out of the family or is it something else."

"I don't want out of the family Dean." Sam replied. "I never did. It's justâ€|you and Dad, you knew mom, you remember her. I've got picturesâ€|it's hard I guess to run for revenge after someone you never knew. I miss her, but I don't think I can miss her like you and Dad do. And I don't want to hunt. You and Dad, you like hunting. And you're good at it."

"You're pretty good too, you know."

"Yeah but I was never good enough." Sam replied, shaking his head. "And I ask too many questions, I want to know too much. I'm more at home with a book than a gun Dean, and I just don't fit in your world. I don't. And I'm tired of being squashed into a hole I just won't fit in."

"We help people, Sam." Dean said, and Sam sighed.

"There are other ways to help people." He whispered.

"What are you going to do at college?" Dean asked, sensing a need for a change of topic, but he didn't want to be too obvious or drastic about it.

"I was looking at law, actually." Sam replied. "That way I can still help people, maybe even you and Dad, if you need it."

Dean paused, surprised. Sam was thinking about his family, even as he was leaving it. Or maybe he wasn't leaving, maybe he was being driven away. It was getting confusing, and Dean didn't know what to think

any more.

"Who's gonna pay for it?"

"Stanford." Sam replied. "I got a full ride." There was a tone of pride in his voice, and Dean found himself reflecting that. The desire to clap Sam on the back for getting into Stanford rose again, and Dean smiled.

"Good on ya Sammy." He said. "You just apply there?"

"Noâ€¦I got in a couple other places butâ€¦Stanford is the youngest, least likely to haveâ€¦you know." Sam answered, shrugging a little.

"You got a roommate?"

"I'm a freshman Dean. Of course I have roommate."

"Gonna be hard to explain salt lines."

"Actually, I think I came up with a solution to that." Sam said, smiling. Dean raised an eyebrow. "I'll show you when we get there."

Silence hung in the air for a while, but it wasn't as heavy as it once was. Dean was running Sam's words and explanations through his mind, taking time to puzzle through Sam, to understand him. Sam was getting used to the idea that his brother didn't hate him now.

"Dad didn't expect me to leave, did he?" Sam finally said, quiet again.

"Did you really think he was going to go for that?" Dean asked, referring to Sam's failed negotiation attempt.

"No. But I had to try." Sam said. "I knew he was gonna be mad, I was pretty sure he was gonna say no butâ€¦I really, \_really \_wanted him to listen, just once."

"He was right about the one foot in, one foot out thing." Dean said, and Sam frowned. "Hunting's kinda an all or nothing gig."

"Why?" Sam asked. "Cause Dad says so? Who made that rule?" Dean set his jaw, but there wasn't anger in Sam's voice, just an honest question.

"Cause someone ends up hurt." Dean replied. "Usually your friends who don't know what you do. Cause you get paranoid, and people ask questions and it just doesn't pan out."

"I wanted to try."

"Sorry Sam."

"I'm not leaving you." Sam said. "Please don't make me."

"I'm not."

"Yes you are." Dean frowned at Sam's words. "I'm never going to see

you after thisâ€¦am I?"

"Sure you are."

"One foot in one out, Dean." Sam said, his eyes narrowed. Dean looked at him for a moment, before focusing back on the road. Sam was trying to get a point across, but Dean was having trouble making it out.

"Dad's gonna try to make you choose too." Sam added, seeming to sense Dean's confusion. "Me, or hunting."

"That's stupid."

"It's what you're asking me to do." Sam shot back, and Dean froze. "You're asking me to choose, you or college. Why can't I have both, Dean? I'm not asking to have my cake and eat it too, I'm just asking not to loose my family."

"You wanted to keep hunting."

"No, I knew that was the only way to even have a hope of dad listening to me." Sam said. "I don't want to hunt. I'll never do it again, if that'll make you happy." He finished, crossing his arms.

"Ok."

"Ok?" Sam sounded confused, turning towards Dean and uncrossing his arms.

"Well, no, but I'm working on it. Look, I don't get it, I really don't. You know me, I hate school. Butâ€¦you want this. Hell, you've wanted this since you knew what college was. I guessâ€¦I dunno why but me and Dad, hunting and Winchester are kinda synonyms. Which when I think about it is pretty stupid. Soâ€¦yeah ok. Let's get you to college Sammy."

Sam stared at him a second longer, before nodding, then yawned.

Dean reached over him, digging into his tape collecting before finding what he was looking for and trading out the tapes, skipping to the song he was looking for. Sam frowned as it came out of the Impala's speakers, music far quieter than usual.

"\_Hey Jude\_? Really?" He asked.

"It was Mom's lullaby when we were kids." Dean answered, and Sam's face grew somber. "Go to sleep Sammy. We'll be halfway there by morning." Sam didn't move for a moment, but then he sunk deeper into the seat of the Impala, and eventually his breathing evened out in rest.

Dean let his mind wander a little, assimilating new information. Sam wasn't leaving him, not really. He was being driven out, but he was trying not to let it be final. As much as Dean still stung from not being enough for Sam to stay with him, he was trying to look at this for what it was. Normal people went to college all the time. And Sam was brilliant. He had every right to go. Dean wasn't gonna stomp on his brother's dreams.

He was gonna do what he always did. Have his little brother's back

'til the end of the line. That would never change. Maybe, with time, the pain of Sam going away would lessen, maybe he'd get to understanding. Maybe this wouldn't break him and Sam. Maybe by being apart, Sam and Dad would be able to repair themselves and their relationship. The last one was probably wishful thinking, but Dean felt like dreaming tonight.

Maybe this wasn't the end. Maybe it was a beginning.

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><p><em><strong>AN:<strong> Ἦ ἡλπίς, ἡ ἀνίμωτος, (O Sophos Moros) is literally translated as "The Wise Witless" or "The Wise Foolish". It is Koine (Biblical) Greek, and some believe that it is the origin of the word Sophomore.\_

End  
file.